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MAJOR GENERAL

GEORGE H. THOMAS.



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MAJOR GENERAL
GEORGE H. THOMAS.

AN ADDRESS
BY
WILLIAM H. LAMBERT.



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The following address was delivered at Lancaster, on the 29th day of May (Decoration Day), 1880, before GEORGE H. THOMAS Post, No. 84, Department of Pennsylvania, Grand Army of the Republic.

In spite of the magnificent achievements of GRANT and SHERMAN, it is probable that GENERAL THOMAS will always be, in the estimation of those who fought under him, and in the sober judgment of history, the Model Soldier of the War. His fame rests upon something besides his brilliant services and great warlike capacity; no other General presents such a shining example of military success, illustrating a grand heroic temper and an exquisite personal character.—*New York Tribune, November 11, 1870.*

MAJOR GENERAL GEORGE H. THOMAS.

In January, 1861, GEORGE H. THOMAS, who had served his country actively during the previous twenty years, was the senior Major of the Second Cavalry, of which regiment ALBERT SIDNEY JOHNSTON was Colonel, LEE Lieutenant-Colonel, VAN DORN junior Major; and KIRBY SMITH, HOOD, and FITZ HUGH LEE were among the line officers.

A Virginian by birth, bound to his native state by ties strong and influential, the outbreak of the war brought to THOMAS, as it brought to many another army officer of Southern birth, great trial—trial to which hundreds proved unequal; but he was among the few who esteemed their country greater than their state: who felt that their oath of fealty to the Government was as binding against treason as it was to service against a foreign foe.

“I have thought it all over and I shall stand firm in the service of the Government” was his determination—a decision never to be recalled—and as heretofore he had been faithful, so henceforth he continued his allegiance to the Nation whose uniform he wore. Nor was his loyalty of the sickly

sort, so familiar at the opening of the war, but from first to last it was genuine and whole-hearted, and throughout the long struggle the country had no servant more devoted, no soldier more patriotic than this Virginia General.

Through the defection of his immediate superiors JOHNSTON and LEE, he was promoted to the Colonelcy of his regiment, and in June, 1861, in command of a brigade, he crossed the Potomac and rendered his first active service during the Rebellion on the soil of his native state.

Appointed Brigadier-General of Volunteers in August, he was assigned to duty in Kentucky, and thenceforward was connected with the Western army. Associated with the Army of the Cumberland from its origin, mustering into the service its first brigade, he continued with that army to the close of the war, when he mustered out its several corps at Louisville. Participating in all its campaigns, taking principal or active part in all its battles, the relation between the Army of the Cumberland and GENERAL THOMAS was of peculiar intimacy and affection.

At Mill Springs in January, 1862, GENERAL THOMAS struck the key note of his career, for the success he there achieved was the initiative of an unbroken series of victories which continued until the closing battle at Nashville. Compared with the great battles which followed ere the year ended, this action now seems insignificant, but remembering that it was the first important victory of our land forces to break the dispiriting inaction which followed Ball's Bluff, its value in encouraging the army and the people cannot be overestimated; nor were its material results insignificant, for it dispersed the rebel Army

of Kentucky and secured that state to the cause of the Government.

In the operations about Corinth he commanded the right wing of the Army of the Tennessee: at the battle of Perryville he was second in command of the Army of the Ohio, and in the reorganization of that army under ROSECRANS, he was assigned to the command of the centre.

At Stone River, GENERAL THOMAS, bore an important part, and the triumph with which that battle ended after two days of hard fighting, was largely due to his prudence and courage.

Commanding the Fourteenth corps he contributed much to the success of the campaign of 1863 which carried our army from Murfreesboro' to Chattanooga. And when BRAGG, obedient to the commands of the alarmed authorities at Richmond, turned at last upon the adversary who had forced him from the banks of the Cumberland to beyond the Tennessee, and with ranks strengthened by accessions from Virginia and Mississippi burst upon the separated corps of ROSECRANS, it was THOMAS who saved the Army of the Cumberland and frustrated the rebel attempt to recover Chattanooga. The onset which swept the right and centre in confusion from the field carrying with them in rout the commander of the army and the commanders of two of his corps, was powerless to drive the left where THOMAS stood at bay. Gathering about him the troops remaining on the field he withstood the repeated assaults of the doubly outnumbering foe. The fast thinning line grew stronger as contracting it drew nearer to its "centre and soul;" fighting under the very eye of the leader, it was inspired by his indomitable will and imperturbable courage to deeds of

gallantry worthy of him and of his men. Hour after hour, the storm of battle raged in relentless fury, threatening at times to submerge, but failing utterly to move the Rock of Chickamauga.

Chattanooga was saved and the results of the summer's campaign secured by THOMAS' magnificent stand at Chickamauga: but a new danger threatened the Army of the Cumberland. Separated from its base of supplies by one hundred and fifty miles of hostile country; its only communication a dilapidated railroad open to the frequent raids of the enemy's cavalry: pent in the little town by the rebel line which stretched along the amphitheatre of hills, each flank resting upon the Tennessee, starvation or the abandonment of the town seemed inevitable. And when GRANT was appointed to the command of the Western armies, so imminent did he deem the peril, that he telegraphed to THOMAS, now the commander of the Army of the Cumberland, "Hold Chattanooga at all hazards." The immediate reply, made with full knowledge of the import of the words was, "We will hold the town till we starve." But THOMAS did not supinely await the impending fate, for within a few days after his accession to the command, he had executed plans which relieved his army from its dangerous condition.

In the battles of November, which raised the siege of Chattanooga and relieved BURNSIDE at Knoxville, THOMAS' command more than retrieved Chickamauga. In glorious array its long lines swept over the intervening plain up the slopes of Missionary Ridge, driving the foe from his entrenchments, whilst on the right, the troops from the Potomac, now

and henceforth part of the Cumberland army, scaled the heights of Lookout, and crossing the valley beyond, forced the enemy back into Georgia.

In the spring campaign of 1864, THOMAS' army comprised three-fifths of SHERMAN'S active command, and his guns thundering against the rocky defences of Dalton began the four months of fighting which ended when at Jonesboro' his troops captured Atlanta. And when SHERMAN, pondering the problem of utilizing his victory, and being aided to speedy solution by HOOD'S northward movement, determined upon the March to the Sea, it was to THOMAS he entrusted the task of confronting the enemy who had so long and so stubbornly resisted the combined armies of the Ohio, Tennessee and Cumberland.

How great was the trust, how vital to the Nation, how important to SHERMAN its successful execution, may be conceived if we imagine the result, had THOMAS proved unequal to the task. Had he failed, the fruits of the Chattanooga and Atlanta campaigns—fruits garnered at tremendous cost—would have been completely wasted, whilst between HOOD'S legions and the North, only the Ohio would have interposed. Had THOMAS failed, SHERMAN, instead of being pronounced the most brilliant of our Generals, would have been judged the most hopelessly incompetent; the great march would have been the farce of our history had it not indeed have proved its darkest tragedy. But the trust was not greater than the man to whom it was given, failure had not yet been written against any undertaking of his, and it never was to be. Hence, when SHERMAN reached the sea, it was to learn that his coastward

march had been approved by THOMAS' entire success, and with natural exultation he issued his order declaring the armies serving in Georgia and Tennessee alike entitled to the common honors, and authorizing each regiment to inscribe on its colors, at will, either Savannah or Nashville; a concession, however valued by the men who shared the pleasures of the holiday march through Georgia, not so highly esteemed by the men who fought at Franklin and at Nashville.

The forces with which GENERAL THOMAS was to encounter HOOD comprised two of the six corps which had made the Atlanta campaign, two divisions which were to come from Missouri, the garrisons of the various posts along the Chattanooga road and the convalescents and furloughed men *en route* to their several commands. Ordering the concentration of his troops at Nashville as soon as the plans of HOOD had been developed, THOMAS calmly awaited his opportunity, perfecting his arrangements and organizing his army, purposing not merely the repulse of the enemy but his utter defeat. Day after day passed in apparent inaction, his adversary meanwhile pressing close upon the entrenchments of the town, but each day was making THOMAS' preparations more thorough and adding to his effective strength. Misunderstanding the causes of the delay, not appreciating the difficulties attending the organization of an army in the presence of a numerically superior foe, and above all, failing to appreciate the character of THOMAS, the authorities at Washington and the Lieutenant General grew impatient and telegraphed again and again urging immediate action. Knowing the issues involved, comprehending the situation with all its surroundings, GENERAL

THOMAS was not shaken in his purpose by the vexation and importunities of his superiors, nor by the threatened removal from command. "I can only say that I have done all in my power to prepare, and if you should deem it necessary to relieve me, I shall submit without a murmur." Resolute in his conviction of duty, he postponed aggressive movements until his matured judgment assured him the hour for action had come. Meanwhile, so great was the impatience of GENERAL GRANT that he left City Point *en route* for Nashville, only to learn at Washington that THOMAS had moved upon the enemy with results which more than justified his deliberation and which forever vindicated his judgment.

With an army "hastily made up from the fragments of three separate commands," GENERAL THOMAS had contended successfully "against a force numerically greater than" his own "and of more thoroughly solid organization," and had inflicted upon it a defeat so crushing as to be a virtual annihilation.

The Army of the Cumberland, which had fought its first battle under THOMAS among the hills whose name it bore, which had won Chattanooga on the Tennessee, which had penetrated far into Georgia and taken Atlanta at Jonesboro', had turned back at last to its earlier fields, and under the same great leader, swept an army out of being at Nashville on the Cumberland.

So complete was the victory that no formidable force of the enemy remained to engage GENERAL THOMAS' army, and the larger part of his infantry was transferred to eastern fields, whilst his cavalry swept east, west and south in the vain endeavor to find an organized foe. So thoroughly had the harvest been garnered that nought remained for the gleaners.

The enemy had vanished, and the war was ended in the Department of the Cumberland.

During the troublous years which followed the war, GENERAL THOMAS held important commands, manifesting the same fidelity, firmness and discretion which had characterized his whole career. How well he appreciated the difficulties in the work of reconstruction is evidenced by the forcible declaration with which he closed his report for the year 1868.

“The controlling cause of the unsettled condition of affairs in the department is, that the greatest efforts made by the defeated insurgents since the close of the war have been to promulgate the idea that the cause of liberty, justice, humanity, equality, and all the calendar of the virtues of freedom, suffered violence and wrong when the efforts for Southern independence failed. This is, of course, intended as a species of political cant, whereby the crime of treason might be covered with a counterfeit varnish of patriotism, so that the precipitators of the rebellion might go down in history hand in hand with the defenders of the Government, thus wiping out with their own hands their own stains; a species of self-forgiveness amazing in its effrontery, when it is considered that life and property—justly forfeited by the laws of the country, of war, and of nations—through the magnanimity of the Government and people, were not exacted from them.”

Transferred in May, 1869, to the command of the Military Division of the Pacific, GENERAL THOMAS died at San Francisco on the 28th day of March, 1870.

From July 1, 1836, when he entered the Academy at West Point, to the day of his death, GENERAL THOMAS continued in the military service of his country, passing through every grade, from Second-Lieutenant to Major-General.

He shrank from no duty, however arduous or distasteful; he asked no favors, he sought no advancement; the *protégé* of no politician, the favorite of no party, he earned every step of his promotion by faithful, intelligent, able service.

Not only did he never seek advancement, he refused to accept it when he believed it involved injustice to others, or when it came in any form other than as the earned reward of duty. In 1862, he declined the proffered command of the Army of the Ohio, urging the retention of GENERAL BUELL, and in 1868, when the brevet commission of Lieutenant-General was tendered him by PRESIDENT JOHNSON, he declined it, because not having received it during the war, he considered that he had done nothing since to warrant it.

He steadfastly refused to receive the presents wherein his admirers sought to give expression to their regard. Plate, money, houses, were alike persistently declined; not because fortune had so favored him as to render the proffered gifts of no moment to him, nor because he failed to appreciate the kindly motives which prompted the tender, but because his sense of honor prohibited him from accepting any compensation for doing his duty other than that which attached to his position. In 1865, learning that it was the purpose of some of his friends to raise a large sum of money to be given him as an expression of their gratitude for his military services, he immediately wrote as follows to the author of the testimonial:

“While I am duly and profoundly sensible of the high compliment thus proposed to be paid me, I would greatly prefer, and if not premature suggest that any sum which may be raised for that purpose be devoted to the founding of a fund for the relief of disabled soldiers, and of the indigent widows and orphans of officers and soldiers who have lost their lives during this war. I am amply rewarded when assured that my humble services have met with the approbation of the government and the people.”

Appreciating the approbation of his official superiors, and not insensible to the praise of the people he courted neither.

Keenly sensitive to injustice, he never allowed slight or wrong to deflect him from his duty. He served to-day as loyally under the man he yesterday commanded as though he had never known the change. He beheld his junior in years, in rank and in service, his own long-time subordinate chosen before him to high honor, and though his great heart felt the wound, no sense of personal injury ever swerved him from his devotion. Not once, not twice, but always, not for himself but for his country.

Simple and modest he shunned notoriety, and never sought to magnify his achievements. No eccentricities of character made him the frequent subject of anecdote and jest: no swelling phrases and pompous declarations announced intention in advance of performance, and no special correspondent attached to head-quarters was charged with the duty of writing up his deeds and filling the press with statements of his views, purposes and plans. His actions were ever louder than his

words. He girded on the harness never to put it off, and boasted himself—never.

Grave and dignified, he tolerated no unsoldierly familiarities; he resorted to no theatrical expedients to gain favor with his troops.

Kind and considerate, he revealed his love for his men not by relaxing discipline, not by effusive proclamation, but by watchful care for their well-being and by jealous regard for their fame. They loved him for what he was with devotion, resulting from confidence in his ability and from faith in his integrity. Their affection displayed itself, not in swinging of hats and in hearty hurrahs as he rode along the lines, but in the soldierly position instinctively assumed, and the soldier's salute instinctively given in the presence of the leader they revered and loved, and that affection had its highest attestation in the unbounded trust each man reposed in the General.

Valuing the lives of his men he never sacrificed them in tentative movements to satisfy the popular demand for action or to fancied necessity for the improvement of their *morale*; but no regard for their lives or for his own ever lessened the vigor of his assault or the tenacity of his defence when the Nation's life demanded sacrifice.

Painstaking and exact, he neglected no details however apparently trivial when upon them might rest the issue of a battle, and he assumed no risk against which care and precaution could guard.

Systematic and thorough, his victories were neither successful experiments nor lucky accidents, but the logical result

of deliberate plan and of effective execution: his battles were not games of hazard, but problems successfully solved.

Prudent in judgment he was powerful in action. Slow and deliberate in thought, decision formed, manifested itself in prompt and energetic accomplishment.

Firm in his convictions of right he was unyielding in his adherence to duty, whether resisting the assault of a rebel army, as at Chickamauga, or withstanding the pressure of impatient superiors and the anxiety of an alarmed people as at Nashville.

Self-controlled in camp, on march and in field, he was unimpassioned alike in the flush of victory or in the gloom of threatened defeat; unmoved by injustice to himself, he was yet capable of a mighty wrath when wrong to others, or reckless exposure of troops, or cowardice, provoked his righteous indignation.

His affections, though undemonstrative, were strong and true, and they who were honored by his friendship had ample proof of its sincerity.

Heroic in form and feature—fitting embodiment of the man—his presence inspired the confidence and respect which his great qualities maintained, for nothing in his private life or character detracts from his soldierly merits or clouds his well-earned fame. No weakness or pettiness belittles him. Admiration for his character grows with increasing familiarity with his life, hence those who knew him best loved him most.

Clean and pure, brave and skillful, honest and magnanimous, he was in truth without fear and without reproach.

Complete and symmetrical, his character combines all the virtues and graces which unite in the great soldier and true gentleman, for such in fullest measure and in highest degree was GENERAL THOMAS.

GENERAL THOMAS gained high military rank, and it is possible, nay, even probable, that had his life been spared he would have attained the highest office in the Nation's gift.

In the history of the war it is recorded that he saved an army at Chickamauga, that he destroyed the army of his enemy at Nashville.

In the Nation's capital the soldiers he commanded have erected a magnificent memorial of their magnificent leader; and the noble figure steadfastly gazing across the historic river to the hills of his native Virginia shall mutely tell the story of his life to the generations yet to come.

But higher than the highest rank, greater than his greatest achievement, grander than the artist's grand conception, more enduring than its bronze, more solid than its granite, is the character of the man. When the history of the war shall have ceased to interest any save the student, when the bronze figure shall have corroded, and the granite pedestal crumbled to dust, the influence of that life shall still endure, and loyalty, honor and duty shall have had no higher embodiment than in the life and character of

GEORGE H. THOMAS.

APPENDIX.

GEORGE HENRY THOMAS.

Born in Southampton County, Virginia, on the

31st day of July, 1816.

Cadet at the United States Military Academy,

July 1, 1836 to July 1, 1840.

Second Lieutenant Third Artillery,

July 1, 1840.

Brevet First-Lieutenant

For gallantry and good conduct in the war against the Florida Indians,

November 6, 1841.

First-Lieutenant Third Artillery,

April 30, 1844.

Brevet Captain

For gallant conduct in the several conflicts at Monterey, Mexico,

September 23, 1846.

Brevet Major

For gallant and meritorious conduct in the battle of Buena Vista, Mexico,

February 23, 1847.

Captain Third Artillery,

December 24, 1853.

Major Second Cavalry,

May 12, 1855.

Lieutenant-Colonel Second Cavalry,
April 25, 1861.

Colonel Second (subsequently Fifth) Cavalry,
May 3, 1861.

Brigadier-General United States Volunteers,
August 17, 1861.

Major-General United States Volunteers,
April 25, 1862.

Brigadier-General United States Army,
October 27, 1863.

Major-General United States Army,
December 15, 1864.

The thanks of Congress tendered to him and his command "for their skill and dauntless courage, by which the rebel army, under General Hood, was signally defeated and driven from the State of Tennessee,"
March 3, 1865.

The thanks of the General Assembly of the State of Tennessee presented to him and his command "for his wise and spirited, and their brave and patriotic conduct in the battle of Nashville, in defence of the capital of the State, in December, 1864,"
November 2, 1865.

Gold Medal, commemorating the battle of Nashville, voted by the General Assembly of the State of Tennessee, presented to him,
December 15, 1866.

Died at San Francisco, California, on the
28th day of March, 1870.

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